

Position Paper Regarding Board Policy 4540:  
Proposal to Reduce The Number of Social Studies  
Credits Required For High School Graduation From  
4 Credits To 3

Respectfully submitted to the Hawai'i State Board of Education by  
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OUTLINE OF POSITION PAPER REGARDING BOARD POLICY 4540:  
PROPOSAL TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF SOCIAL STUDIES CREDITS  
REQUIRED FOR HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION FROM 4 CREDITS TO 3

- I. INTRODUCTION.
- II. WHAT IS SOCIAL STUDIES AND WHY IT IS IMPORTANT?
- III. THE HAWAII STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RECOGNIZES THE NEED FOR INFORMED YOUNG PEOPLE WHO CAN CONTRIBUTE TO AND COMPETE IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY.
- IV. THE FOUR YEARS OF SOCIAL STUDIES CURRENTLY REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION ARE NECESSARY TO MEET THE MISSION AND GOALS OF THE DOE AND BOE AND TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKERS AND THOUGHTFUL CITIZENS.
  - A. Current Graduation Requirements.
  - B. The Fourth Year of Social Studies Electives Classes Currently Required For Graduation Is Necessary To Provide Hawai'i's Students With A Rigorous Curriculum And Produce Responsible, Knowledgeable, Career and College Ready Graduates.
- V. THE REASONS PUT FORTH FOR REDUCING THE REQUIRED SOCIAL STUDIES CREDITS FROM FOUR TO THREE HAVE NO MERIT.
  - A. Reducing the number of social studies credits from four to three will result in a less rigorous program of study.
  - B. If the number of required social studies credits is reduced from four to three, Hawai'i's high school graduates will be less prepared for college and careers.
  - C. The current graduation requirements, which require 6 elective credits, provide more than enough flexibility and opportunity for students to pursue their career interests in high school.
  - D. Reducing the number of SS credits from four to three will reduce, rather than increase the number of courses students have to choose from, and severely limit the ability of students to take the social studies electives.
- VI. CONCLUSION.

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I. INTRODUCTION.

The Hawai'i State Board of Education (BOE) is currently reviewing a proposal to revise Board Policy 4540 High School Graduation Requirements and Commencement to, among other things, reduce the number of social studies credits required for graduation from four credits to three. To assist the Board in making an informed decision on this very important issue, we respectfully submit this position paper. It is our hope that after reading this paper, the Board will have a clearer understanding regarding the nature of social studies, the importance of social studies, and why maintaining the current four credit social studies requirement is in the best interest of Hawai'i's public school students, their families and their communities.

II. WHAT IS SOCIAL STUDIES AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Contrary to popular belief, the field of social studies covers more than just history. "Social studies" is a hybrid term created in 1916 to refer to the combination of the social sciences with history. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the largest professional association for social studies educators in the world, defines social studies as the integration of the social sciences, history and the humanities to promote civic education.<sup>i</sup> The social sciences include anthropology (the study of culture), economics (allocation of resources), geography (space and location), sociology (group behavior), political science (power), and psychology (individual behavior). "The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world."<sup>ii</sup>

A strong social studies curriculum is especially important in a democratic society like ours, where government is run by the people. In order for citizens to make intelligent decisions that affect their government and community, they must know how their government works, their individual rights and responsibilities, and possess a basic understanding of their nation and world. Social studies provides this information and teaches critical thinking skills that help students obtain and process that information.

The aim of social studies is the promotion of civic competence—the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life. . . . Civic competence rests on [a] . . . commitment to democratic values, and requires the abilities to use knowledge about one's community, nation, and world; apply inquiry processes; and employ skills of data collection and analysis, collaboration, decision-making, and problem-solving. Young people who are knowledgeable, skillful, and committed to democracy are necessary to sustaining and improving our democratic way of life, and participating as members of a global community.<sup>iii</sup>

U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan recently recognized the importance of social studies in preparing children to be knowledgeable, responsible, active citizens. In an article he wrote for the NCSS publication, *Social Education*, he stated, “Today, more than ever, the social studies are not a luxury, but a necessity.”<sup>iv</sup> “Educators and policymakers need to recognize that social studies is a core subject, critical to sustaining an informed democracy and a globally competitive market.”<sup>v</sup> According to Secretary Duncan,

The real objective is not to get students to score well on myriad bubble tests of content knowledge, but to help them all to become engaged and thinking citizens who are prepared for college and careers. The social studies play a critical role in creating civically competent young people who make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good and who contribute to an increasingly diverse but interdependent world.<sup>vi</sup>

### III. THE HAWAII STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RECOGNIZES THE NEED FOR INFORMED YOUNG PEOPLE WHO CAN CONTRIBUTE TO AND COMPETE IN A GLOBAL SOCIETY.

The DOE, BOE and the Hawai‘i State Legislature all recognize the need for civically competent young people who can make informed decisions and who can contribute to and compete in a diverse, interdependent world. According to the DOE’s mission statement,

High school students will have opportunities, not limited by time, for college-level coursework and program endorsements to prepare them to be successful in a global society. Therefore, all graduates will be fully prepared for post-secondary education and/or careers and their role as a responsible citizen.<sup>vii</sup>

In addition, according to the Hawai‘i State Department of Education Authorized Courses and Code Numbers Catalog 2006-2010 (ACCN), the goal of social studies in Hawai‘i’s public schools is to help develop within all learners:

- civic responsibility and the skills of a participating citizenry;
- perspective in their own life experiences so that they see themselves as makers and shapers of the larger human adventure in time and place;
- critical understandings of the history, geography, economic, political, and social institutions, traditions and values of the United States as expressed in unity, diversity, and interdependence;
- appreciation of the global diversity and interdependence of the world’s people, institutions, traditions, values and environment; and
- critical dispositions and habits of mind appropriate to the world of work and life-long learning.<sup>viii</sup>

Moreover, the current version of Board Policy 4540, High School Graduation Requirements and Commencement, which took effect in School Year 2009-2010 and applies to students beginning with the Class of 2013, states:

A. Requirements for High School Graduation. The purpose of high school graduation requirements is to establish rigorous standards of learning that will enable all public school students to meet the vision of a Hawaii public school graduate. All Hawaii public school graduates will:

- Realize their individual goals and aspirations;
- Possess the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to contribute positively and compete in a global society;
- Exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and
- Pursue post-secondary education and/or careers without need for remediation.<sup>ix</sup>

Finally, Act 51: Reinventing Education Act, passed by the Hawai'i State Legislature in 2004 states: "Although many responsibilities are laid upon education, ultimately education must do no less than advance the endowment of human culture itself, so that each succeeding generation finds itself further along the road towards peace, social justice, and environmental sustainability in a society guided by creativity, compassion, and curiosity."<sup>x</sup>

#### IV. THE FOUR YEARS OF SOCIAL STUDIES CURRENTLY REQUIRED FOR GRADUATION ARE NECESSARY TO MEET THE MISSION AND GOALS OF THE DOE AND BOE AND TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKERS AND THOUGHTFUL CITIZENS.

##### A. Current Graduation Requirements.

The current DOE graduation requirements for social studies emphasize both history and other social studies disciplines such as economics, psychology, and the study of current American and global issues. Under the current DOE graduation requirements, students are required to earn 4 credits of social studies consisting of: 1 year of U.S. History (1 credit), 1 year of World History (1 credit), 1 semester of Modern History of Hawai'i (1/2 credit), 1 semester of Participation in a Democracy/Civics (1/2 credit), and 1 credit of social studies "elective" classes. The social studies "elective" credit is required, but students are able to choose from a variety of social studies classes based on their interests. Generally, the social studies elective classes are semester courses, worth ½ credit each, except for certain Advanced Placement (AP) classes, such as AP U.S. History and A.P. World History, which are year-long classes, worth 1 credit each.

With respect to the types of social studies electives available, the DOE ACCN includes 28 possible social studies elective classes that high schools may offer, including classes such as Economics, Geography, Global Issues, Political Processes, Hawaiian Studies, Pacific Island Studies, Ethnic Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Asian Studies, Anthropology, Philosophy, Humanities, and many AP courses. However, not all social studies electives listed in the ACCN catalog are offered. Schools determine which social studies electives are offered based on the number of students who register for the class and teacher availability. If enrollment is less than a quota set by school resources, the class will not be offered, even if there is a teacher willing and available to teach it

**B. The Fourth Year of Social Studies Electives Classes Currently Required For Graduation Is Necessary To Provide Hawai'i's Students With A Rigorous Curriculum And Produce Responsible, Knowledgeable, Career and College Ready Graduates.**

It is important to remember that it is the combination of the different disciplines within the social studies that provides students with the skills to responsibly and knowledgeably participate in their community and greater world. “In democratic classrooms and nations, deep understanding of civic issues—such as immigration, economic problems, and foreign policy—involves several disciplines.”<sup>xi</sup>

Currently, the four social studies credits required by the DOE for high school graduation provide a rigorous curriculum of sufficient depth to provide Hawai'i's youth with the knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to compete in today's global market and participate in our society as informed responsible citizens. First, by requiring high school students to take World History, U.S. History, and Modern History of Hawai'i, the DOE ensures that each student gains a basic understanding of historic events, people and cultures as well as how this history influenced and continues to influence their world today. Second, by requiring every student to take Participation in a Democracy, the DOE's civics class, the DOE ensures that every graduate has a basic understanding of his or her civic rights and responsibilities, how our government works, and their role within our democratic society. Third, by requiring students to take a fourth year of social studies elective classes, the DOE provides sufficient time and opportunity for students to expand and deepen their understanding of their society and apply that understanding to current issues and situations.

Three years is simply not enough time to provide the necessary information and experience to equip our graduates for the future. The first three years of high school are needed to provide students with a basic historical foundation. The 4<sup>th</sup> year social studies elective courses then broaden and expand student knowledge, understanding and perspectives, allowing students to take the basic historical survey information they have acquired in their U.S. History, World History, Participation in a Democracy/Civics and Modern History of Hawai'i classes and apply that information in more specific settings and situations relevant to their world. For example, in elective classes such as American Problems and Economics, students can take the information from their Civics, U.S. History, and World History classes to analyze and evaluate the government's plans to reduce the national deficit or evaluate the validity of a political candidate's proposals for economic reform. Students can also use the knowledge they gained about the U.S. government and citizens' rights in their Participation in a Democracy, AP Government, Hawaiian Studies and Ethnic Studies classes to fight for civil rights. Students in Global Studies, Economics, or Geography classes can study competition for the world's natural resources and the effect of that competition on the national and world economy and foreign policy. Similarly, in a Political Science or Global Studies class, students can use their historical knowledge as a starting point for understanding current international conflicts and human rights issues such as genocide. These types of learning exercises equip them to evaluate and make sense of the issues that will confront them as adults.

The current four-credit social studies requirements also provide information and insight applicable to jobs and careers. For example, in a culturally diverse society like Hawai'i, where the economy depends on tourism and developing international trade, classes such as World History, Ethnic Studies, Pacific Island Studies, Hawaiian Studies and Global Studies are necessary to instill cultural awareness, tolerance and understanding in our young people. Those working in the business community, including banking, finance, real estate and tourism need a basic understanding of economics and the effects of supply and demand. Global issues such as supply of resources and environmental issues affect those in the business and the building industry. All those who have to work with others, including health care workers, those in the tourism industry, and public safety workers would benefit from a basic understanding of sociology and psychology and exposure to different cultures. The social studies also provide an understanding of world organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), some of which, like APEC, will directly affect Hawai'i and Hawai'i's economy. If Hawai'i is to take its place in the global market, its citizens must have a better understanding of the integration of the economics, social and political issues of globalization.

Social studies classes are also important because they develop analytical, research, writing, and oral communication skills. Not only are students required to research, analyze, evaluate and take positions on issues and historical questions, but they are also required to present their analysis and ideas in written, oral and media presentations. As students advance through high school, they are challenged with more in depth and sophisticated writing and presentation assignments. The ability to synthesize information and to effectively communicate are critical skills necessary to compete in today's society.

## V. THE REASONS PUT FORTH FOR REDUCING THE REQUIRED SOCIAL STUDIES CREDITS FROM FOUR TO THREE HAVE NO MERIT.

### A. Reducing the number of social studies credits from four to three will result in a less rigorous program of study.

Proponents of the changes to the graduation requirements, including the proposal to reduce the number of social studies credits from four to three incorrectly claim such changes will result in more rigorous graduation requirements. One of the primary changes being made to the graduation requirements is to reduce the number of social studies credits from four to three and increase the required number of elective credits from six to seven. To suggest that allowing students more elective time at the sacrifice of a core subject like social studies will result in a more rigorous curriculum is disingenuous at best. Given the option, the great majority of teenagers will not sign up for a social studies elective class because of the perception that these classes are more challenging and require critical thinking and research and writing skills. They will end up taking less challenging elective classes that will allow them to "cruise" at the cost of being less informed. As a result, most of Hawai'i's students will not choose to take a fourth year of social studies and will graduate with only a basic knowledge of World, U.S., and Hawai'i's history. They will have been deprived of the opportunity to expand their world vision as well as the chance to take the historical knowledge they have gained and apply and expand that information into areas relevant to their lives. Hawai'i's community and employers will be

deprived of knowledgeable young people who have learned to make informed, reasoned decisions.

- B. If the number of required social studies credits is reduced from four to three, **Hawai'i's high school graduates will be less prepared for college and careers.**

Proponents of the revised graduation requirements claim that the revisions will help Hawai'i's high school students become "college and career ready." However, students will be less prepared for college and careers if they are no longer required to take a 4<sup>th</sup> year of social studies credits. As discussed earlier, the 4<sup>th</sup> year social studies elective classes provide specialized knowledge that students can apply to their courses of college study and their careers. The social studies elective classes also provide students with an additional year in which to develop and hone their critical thinking, analysis, evaluation, writing and communication skills. In his article in *Social Education*, Secretary Duncan addressed social studies teachers directly about the importance of their role in preparing students for the future. He wrote,

. . . your goals for students are so much larger than any bubble test could measure. You are creating contributing and responsible citizens. You are unleashing initiative, creativity, and problem-solving. You can always test to see if students understand the founding principles of the U.S. Constitution or where the Great Lakes are, but there is no bubble test to see whether or not they are becoming curious and informed participants in our democracy. To be on track today for college and careers, students need to show that they can analyze and solve complex problems, communicate clearly, synthesize information, apply knowledge, and generalize learning to other settings."<sup>xii</sup>

Moreover, as a result of the proposed reduction of required social studies credits, most students will graduate without any knowledge of their country's government, what it means to have a democratic society and what it takes to preserve and protect that democracy. Under the proposed changes to the social studies graduation requirements, students will no longer be required to take Participation in a Democracy (PID), the DOE's civics class. Among other things, PID covers the history of America's constitutional democracy, how the U.S. government works, and the rights and responsibilities of U.S. citizens. This knowledge is critical if Hawai'i's graduates are going to understand the importance of voting and other ways to participate in their government to protect their needs and interests and those of their community. If, as is proposed, students are not required to take PID and it instead becomes one of the social studies elective classes, only a limited number of students, if any, will opt to take the class and receive this critical information.

- C. The current graduation requirements, which require six elective credits, provide more than enough flexibility and opportunity for students to pursue their career interests in high school.

Proponents of the proposal to reduce the number of social studies credits from four to three and increase the number of required elective credits from six to seven argue that the additional elective credit will provide flexibility and opportunity for students to be pursuing their career interests in high school. The proposal, it is claimed, "gives students an additional



credit so those interested in STEM (Science, Technology, engineering and math) careers can take additional STEM courses, those interested in liberal arts can take more social studies courses, and those planning to go straight into technical careers can take more career/technical education courses.”<sup>xiii</sup> However this argument is flawed in a number of ways.

First, under the current graduation requirements, students have more than ample opportunity to take elective classes to explore their interests. Presently, students are required to take 6 elective credits. This translates into a student essentially taking 12 semester elective classes, or 6 year-long elective classes over the course of 4 years. Thus, for example, a student could take 4 semester electives in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, 4 semester electives 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 4 semester electives in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and 2 semester electives in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Even if a student took elective classes that were year-long courses as opposed to semester courses, that student will still have taken at 6 elective classes by the time they graduate.

In addition, careers in science, technology, engineering and math cannot operate in a STEM-only vacuum. It is the purpose of social studies to teach students to think about the morals and ethics that accompany decisions about the use and application of technology. “Modern life as we know it would be impossible without technology and the science that supports it.” But technology brings with it many questions: “What can we learn from the past about how new technologies result in broader social change, some of which is unanticipated? Is new technology always better than old? How can we preserve fundamental values and beliefs in a world that is rapidly becoming one technology-linked village? How do science and technology affect our sense of self and morality? How are disparate cultures, geographically separated but impacted by global events, brought together by the technology that informs us about events, and offered hope by the science that may alleviate global problems (e.g., the spread of AIDS)?”<sup>xiv</sup> As teacher Paul Stader said in his testimony to the Board of Education on June 21, 2011, regarding the proposed changes to the graduation requirements, “Math and science gave us the atomic bomb, but the ethics and morals of using it is what students get in social studies.”<sup>xv</sup>

Finally, the belief that high school students have a clear idea of their future career paths is flawed and unsubstantiated. High school is a time for intellectual and career exploration. Teenagers are too young and inexperienced to be able to decide for certain what their career paths should be. High school should expose them to ideas and subjects they might not normally choose, so that they become aware of what the world has to offer. Our job as educators should be to expose them to a wide breadth of information, ideas, and experiences so they can make fully informed decisions about their future. A complete social studies education has the advantage of providing such information to our students, while at the same time teaching analytical, reasoning and communication skills so that they can take the information they have gained and apply it to their lives and their community. The social studies electives, with their broad coverage and focus on critical analysis and reasoning gives students a broader world view, which in turn better equips them to make decisions about their future.

- D. Reducing the number of social studies credits from four to three will reduce, rather than increase the number of courses students have to choose from, and severely limit the ability of students to take the social studies electives.

Some argue that even if the number of required social studies credits is reduced to three, students will still be able to take social studies elective classes if they so desire. However, this is simply not true. Reducing the number of required social studies credits will actually reduce the types and number of social studies electives being offered because class enrollment drives what classes are offered. Thus, if a whole senior class of 500 students is required to take 2 social studies elective classes, a wide variety of elective classes can be offered. The larger pool of students with varied interests means students will register for an assortment of classes such as Psychology, Sociology, Geography, AP Government, Economics, American Problems and Global Studies. However, if the 4<sup>th</sup> social studies credit is eliminated, less students will sign up to take a social studies elective. So, for example, if only 50 students decide to take a social studies elective, and 10 are interested in taking AP Government, and 40 are interested in taking sociology, then sociology will be offered, and not AP Government because the number of students registering for AP Government does not meet the minimum class size needed for a school to offer a class. As a result, those students who are interested in the social studies electives may not be able to take the classes in which they are interested.

## VI. CONCLUSION.

In sum, Hawai'i's students need four years of high school social studies in order to gain the skills necessary to compete in today's Global society. The current social studies curriculum, which includes classes in history, civics, economics, geography, and global studies, prepares students to successfully face the future. It also gives them the chance to delve deeper into subjects that interest them, and allows them to expand, broaden and apply the knowledge they gained in their basic history classes, so they can analyze, understand and evaluate real-world problems. Reducing the number of social studies credits required for graduation from four to three will result in less rigorous graduation requirements and less college and career ready graduates. Students have more than enough opportunity to pursue their career interests under the present six elective credits required for graduation. In light of this, we respectfully request that the Board of Education continue the social studies graduation requirements as they currently stand and reject the proposal to reduce the number of social studies credits required for graduation from four to three.

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<sup>i</sup> "National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Introduction." *Socialstudies.org*. National Council for the Social Studies, n.d. Web. 12 July 2011.  
<<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/introduction>>.

<sup>ii</sup> Id.

<sup>iii</sup> Id.

<sup>iv</sup> Duncan, Arne . "The Social Studies Are Essential To A Well-Rounded Education." *SocialEducation* May. - Jun. 2011: 124-125. Print.

<sup>v</sup> Id. at 124.

<sup>vi</sup> Id. at 125.

<sup>vii</sup> "Introduction, Mission Statement." *Hawai`i's Public Schools*. Hawaii State Department of Education, n.d. Web. 12 July 2011. <[http://doe.k12.hi.us/about/intro\\_mission.htm](http://doe.k12.hi.us/about/intro_mission.htm)> (Emphasis added.)

<sup>viii</sup> "Authorized Courses and Code Numbers Catalog (Standards Based ACCN)." *Hawai`i's Public Schools*. Hawai`i Department of Education, n.d. Web. 21 July 2011.  
<[http://doe.k12.hi.us/curriculum/accn/ACCN\\_2006\\_2010\\_rev3.pdf](http://doe.k12.hi.us/curriculum/accn/ACCN_2006_2010_rev3.pdf)>.

<sup>ix</sup> "Policy - High School Graduation Requirements And Commencement." *Hawaii State Board of Education*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 July 2011.  
<<http://lilinode.k12.hi.us/STATE/BOE/POL1.NSF/85255a0a0010ae82852555340060479d/91ae48edb6f3e0140a2566a3006f0dec?OpenDocument>>.

<sup>x</sup> "REACH Overview." *Reinventing Education Act For The Children of Hawai`i*. Hawai`i State Department of Education, n.d., Web. 20 July 2011. < <http://reach.k12.hi.us/Act51SB3238amended1.pdf>>.

<sup>xi</sup> "National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Introduction." *Socialstudies.org*. National Council for the Social Studies, n.d. Web. 12 July 2011.  
<<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/introduction>>.

<sup>xii</sup> Duncan, Arne. "The Social Studies Are Essential To A Well-Rounded Education." *SocialEducation* May. - Jun. 2011: 124-125. Print.

<sup>xiii</sup> Poythress, Katherine. "Honolulu Civil Beat - UH Chimes In On Hawaii Social Studies Debate - Post." *Honolulu Civil Beat - News Reporting and Conversation*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 July 2011.  
<<http://www.civilbeat.com/posts/2011/07/07/12020-uh-chimes-in-on-hawaii-social-studies-debate/>>.

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<sup>xiv</sup> “National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Chapter 2—The Themes of Social Studies.” *Socialstudies.org*. National Council for the Social Studies, n.d. Web. 21 July 2011. <<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands NCSSn.d>>.

<sup>xv</sup> “BOE panel recommends tougher graduation standards.” *Staradvertiser.com*. Honolulu Star-Advertiser, 21 June 2011, n.page. Web. 21 July 2011.